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An Evaluation of the Novels of Mari Sandoz

Marian Barnes

AN EVALUATION OF THE NOVELS OF MARI SANDOZ

BY

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AN EVALUATION OF THE NOVELS

OF MARI SANDOZ

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree, but without implying that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Some novels are read and forgotten. Other novels are read and reread. The obvious question arising from this fact is why some are successful and some are not. This question seems particularly applicable to Mari Sandoz' novels. Mari Sandoz is an established Nebraskan writer; she is known primarily for her biographical and historical books. So recognized is Mari Sandoz as a Nebraska author that the governor of Nebraska proclaimed August 23, 1954, "Mari Sandoz Day" in honor of the publication of The Buffalo Hunters.[1]

But Miss Sandoz has been recognized beyond the confines of her own state. Old Jules, the biography of her father, won the Atlantic Monthly Press non-fiction award in 1935. In 1959, Mari Sandoz received the Buffalo Award of the New York Posse of the Westerners for The Cattlemen. In 1962, she was given the Oppie award for These Were the Sioux. She also received the Western Heritage Award in 1962 for an article on the last frontier published in American Heritage.[2] Other titles recognized by those interested in western Americana are Crazy Horse (1942), Cheyenne Autumn (1953),

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[1]Stanley J. Kunitz and Vineta Colby (eds.), Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1955), p. 863.

[2]James M. Ethridge (ed.), Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1963), p. 169.

Love Song to the Plains (1961), The Beaver Men (1964), and The Battle of the Little Bighorn (1966). Her books have been published in Swiss and German editions, with Old Jules being named the book of the month in the Scandinavian countries, and it was serialized and issued in half a dozen editions.[1] Mari Sandoz is recognized enough as a writer to be listed in The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 4th edition, 1965; Who's Who in America and in Who's Who of American Women, 4th edition, 1966-67; and in Who Knows - And What, revised edition (1954).

Very little specialized critical and biographical material is available on Mari Sandoz. Presumably this will change since her recent death (1966) and since the University of Nebraska has particular interest in her. Most of the pertinent material on Mari Sandoz comes from magazine reviews of her work and from short articles. She is listed very briefly in some reference encyclopedias. In the classic studies of western literature, she has no place. Henry Nash Smith does not mention her in Virgin Land, The American West as Symbol and Myth. Neither is she included in histories of American literature or in western literature books. She is not listed in Contemporary American Authors by Fred B. Millet.

While quite well known for her non-fiction, Mari Sandoz has written, in addition, many short stories and eight other books consistently listed as fiction. These books are Slogum House (1937),

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[1] Contemporary Authors, p. 169.

Capital City (1939), The Tom-Walker (1947), Winter Thunder (1954), Miss Morissa, Doctor of the Gold Trail (1955), The Horsecatcher (1957), Son of the Gamblin' Man (1960), and The Story Catcher (1963). Of these eight, three are probably generally known: Miss Morissa, Winter Thunder, and The Horsecatcher. The latter two and The Story Catcher are novelettes or long short stories and really cannot be considered novels.

Miss Sandoz' fiction has not been as successful as her other work. One listing of her works refers to the non-fiction "which was her best work."[1] Another critic comments that "She is less successful in fiction than in biography, but she is a good corrective for people inclined to sentimentalize the pioneer."[2] In a biographical sketch of Miss Sandoz, Bruce H. Nicoll does not mention Slogum House, The Tom-Walker, Capital City, or Cheyenne Autumn and presumably does not feel they are worth mentioning.[3] The blurbs about the author on the jackets of her books will almost always mention Old Jules, Crazy Horse, and Cheyenne Autumn, her non-fiction work. The next most mentioned books are The Cattlemen, These Were the Sioux, The Buffalo Hunters, and Miss Morissa. Only if a complete listing of novels is given, does one find the other four "fiction novels" mentioned.

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[1]Max J. Herzberg et al., The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), p. 992.

[2]Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), p. 1230.

[3]Bruce H. Nicoll, "Miss Sandoz: Nebraska Loner," The American West Vol. II (Spring, 1965) p. 36.

One indication of a book's readability is the number of reprintings and editions that the book has had. Old Jules was copyrighted in 1935 and again in 1963. A paperback edition was published in 1962. Crazy Horse was reprinted in February, 1944; in August, 1945; in October, 1955; and in September, 1958. A paperback edition in 1961 has had three printings, 1962, 1964, and 1966. The Battle of the Little Bighorn, published in 1966, has had a second printing. Love Song to the Plains, 1961, was published in a paperback edition in 1966. The Cattlemen, 1958, has had two reprintings. Miss Morissa has been reprinted, the fifth printing in 1968. Capital City, Son of the Gamblin' Man, and The Tom-Walker are out of print. Slogum House, including a paper back edition, is out of print.[1] One might conclude from this that Mari Sandoz' novels have certainly been less popular than her non-fiction.

There is other evidence that Mari Sandoz' non-fiction is regarded as her best work. One editor wrote:

> Mari Sandoz, noted historian of the west and fiction writer, from Old Jules to the recent Son of the Gamblin' Man and Love Song to the Plains, continues her search for the seventh volume in her Great Plains Series. Miss Sandoz is the only writer, living or dead, who has had four books placed on the list of "One Hundred Best Books of the West."[2]

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[1]This information has been taken from the copyright pages of the books themselves, and from Sarah L. Prakker (ed.), Books in Print, Vols. I and II (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1967), pp. 1212, 1485.

[2]"Contributors," Prairie Schooner XXXVII (Spring, 1959), p. 186.

This writer has been unable to find this particular list. The four books are probably Old Jules, Crazy Horse, Cheyenne Autumn, and one of the other non-fiction books. During the Nebraska Centennial year, a number of Nebraskans were asked to name three books, of any type, that they considered best books about Nebraska that would give the best insight to Nebraska. The two top books were Willa Cather's My Antonia and Mari Sandoz' Old Jules. Love Song to the Plains received one or two votes.[1] Miss Sandoz' reputation as a fiction writer is more apt to be based on her numerous short stories than on the "fiction novels." She wrote more than thirty short stories and articles, some of which have been reprinted and anthologized, for such periodicals as Scribner's Saturday Evening Post, Blue Book, Prairie Schooner, and others.[2] Some of her stories and novelettes are also listed for children.[3] Apparently Mari Sandoz herself had some question about the quality of her fiction. When she was asked about a foreword, including an appreciation and appraisal of her works, she wrote:

> I am stuck again with the inadequacy of my short writings as any gauge of me as a writer, or at least I hope so. . . . anyone with good literary standards is going to find these

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[1]"Best Books about Nebraska," Prairie Schooner, XLI (Summer 1967), p. 264.

[2]Etheridge, p. 169.

[3]The Junior High School Library Catalog, first edition, (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1965), p. 675, lists "Girl in the Humbert," The Horsecatcher, and the Story Catcher. The Standard Catalog for High School Libraries, eighth edition, (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1962), p. 919, lists The Buffalo Hunters, "Girl in the Humbert," The Horsecatcher, and Lost School Bus.

> pieces of minor importance. If the critic is familiar with my books, he's going to have to ask, if he's honest at all, why this inferior work was anthologized. . . . If he doesn't say that my long works are superior to this, then the first evaluation of any body of my work will tend to set the critical tone of my work for all time--No one will want to evaluate my writing as a whole because a partial examination found it so inadequate. . . . You know how these things go. It's true that I'm not afraid of the evaluation posterity will put upon my nonfiction--good or bad it is unique in its field and those who come after me will have to depend upon it to a very large extent. These books have always had critical acclaim even if not always understanding, and one shouldn't expect the impossible.[1]

It is not the intention of this writer to evaluate Miss Sandoz' reputation as a Great Plains historian and writer. Her contribution to midwest Americana is recognized in her historical non-fiction. She "knows the Great Plains, as they say, like the palm of her hand . . ."[2] Her work is said to be beautifully written and full of striking images and masterful descriptions.[3] She describes the prairie as no one else has, excepting perhaps, Willa Cather. It is Miss Sandoz' ability as a writer of fiction, specifically in the novel form, that raises questions on the part of the critic. The book reviewers have given opposing views and appraisals of her "fiction novels." Opposing evaluations of Miss Morissa are examples. V. P. Hass of the Chicago Sunday Tribune wrote, "With

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[1]Mari Sandoz, Hostiles and Friendlies, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. xii.

[2]Bernard Kalb, "Biographical Sketch," Saturday Review, August 21, 1954, p. 11.

[3]Mertice M. James, and Dorothy Brown, Book Review Digest, 1955 (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1905_____.), p. 797.

this splendid novel Mari Sandoz takes her place in the front rank of American writers of pioneer fiction. Willa Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop, alone excepted, Miss Morissa is, to my mind, the finest achievement in the genre that we have ever had."[1] W. R. Burnett, the New York Times, said, "Like all of Miss Sandoz books, it is beautifully written and full of striking images and material description. As a novel it doesn't succeed."[2]

One of the problems in Mari Sandoz' work is distinguishing between her fiction and non-fiction. Reviewers of her works often suggest that there is little difference between these forms. Ernest Leisy calls Slogum House "a fine piece of reporting"[3] as does Margaret Wallace in the New York Times, November 28, 1937.[4] Hugh Brogan says of the biography, Cheyenne Autumn, "Much of the book concerns feelings, calculations, and experiences that the documents and the survivors whom she consulted could not recount, but which must have happened."[5] The reviewer of Son of the Gamblin' Man in Time May 2, 1960 says, "the story is true and author Sandoz might

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[1]Book Review Digest, 1955, p. 797.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ernest E. Leisy, The American Historical Novel, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 201.

[4]Book Review Digest, 1937, p. 852.

[5]Hugh Brogan, "Mari Sandoz: An English Opinion," Prairie Schooner, XL (Winter 1966), p. 289.

just as well have told it straight . . . ."[1] B. B. Libaire, speaking of The Tom-Walker, says the "story verges often on the non-fiction tract."[2] Knowing this difficulty of separating Miss Sandoz' fiction and non-fiction, this investigator has arbitrarily confined her analysis to five works: Slogum House, Capital City, The Tom-Waller. Miss Morissa, and Son of the Gamblin' Man. These are most often listed as her "fiction novels" of full length.

Although the five "fiction novels" have the same quality of local color and of descriptive imagery as the non-fiction, they have not been read as frequently. The fact that Mari Sandoz' work is regional and historical does not fully explain the lack of success of her novels. This fact brings the reader back to the question of what makes a piece of fiction a good novel. A reader does not like a story just for its special interest alone. One may like or enjoy all detective stories, but he will find a few of these stories are better than the others and he will enjoy rereading these few. The person interested in Nebraska history will choose to read Old Jules or Love Song to the Plains, not Capital City or Son of the Gamblin' Man. The novel must then be evaluated on its artistic merit and not on its local or regional significance.

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[1] Book Review Digest, 1960, p. 1175.

[2] Ibid., 1947, p. 786.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the five "fiction novels" of Mari Sandoz in terms of the fundamental requirements of fiction established by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks in Understanding Fiction and The Scope of Fiction.

After establishing the criteria for evaluation based on Brooks and Warren in the introduction, this thesis will then give a brief biographical sketch of Mari Sandoz and a synopsis of each novel with the early criticism in Chapter II. This will be followed by a discussion of plot, the structure of action in Chapter III. Chapter IV will examine characterization in the novels. The requirements of theme and unity will be discussed in Chapter V. The conclusions of the evaluation will be made in this chapter, too.

Criteria of Evaluation

There are many books that discuss fiction, what it is, how to write it, and how to judge it. Most authors discuss the same basic qualities that Brooks and Warren discuss, but with less clarity. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their book Understanding Fiction and its shorter version The Scope of Fiction, give what this writer believes is one of the best answers to the question what makes a good novel.[1]

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[1]These two volumes are widely used as textbooks in recognized beginning literature courses. Both authors are writers, teachers, and critics.

Although Brooks and Warren break down their analysis into the traditional plot, character, and theme, they recognize that these elements do not exist apart from one another. They write:

> Each can be thought of separately, and discussed separately, but in actuality they are completely interfused. A plot cannot exist without characters who act and are acted upon; a character fulfills himself only in action; and all human action involves a judgment of values, that is, an idea, a theme . . . . These aspects . . . form an organic unity, a unity which is expressive and significant. It has the power to engage our interests and excite our feelings, not by reason of the particular elements that enter into it, but by reason of their interrelations.[1]

As these two writers state in their preface to the book, the reader "may realize that his liking for a story does not depend finally upon his threshold interests, --but rather depends, in one sense at least, upon the total structure, upon the logic of whole, the relationships existing among elements of character and psychology, action, social situation, ideas and attitude, style, and so on."[2] A good novel, then, should be an artistic whole, a unity. The writers further state "that to be good a piece of fiction must involve an idea of some real significance for mature human beings."[3] However, it is not the idea alone, but its relationship to the artistic whole.

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[1]Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, The Scope of Fiction, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), p. 1.

[2]The Scope of Fiction, p. viii.

[3]Ibid., p. xi.

> The idea is important in a story in so far as it is incorporated into the total structure, in so far as the story lives out the idea, and, in the process of living, modifies the idea. . . . A piece of fiction is a unity, in so far as the piece of fiction is successful. Its elements are so related that we feel an expressive interpenetration among them, a set of vital relationships.[1]

On the basis of the Brooks and Warren analysis, the following criteria have been established.

1. The first requirement of good fiction is a clearly defined plot or story line. This is what happens in the story. Brooks and Warren write:

> Plot . . . is the structure of an action as presented in a piece of fiction. It is not, . . . the structure of an action as we happen to find it out in the world, but the structure within a story . . . . What the teller of the story has done to the action in order to present it to us . . . (action is) a series of events, a movement through time, exhibiting unity and significance.[2]

There should be three logical stages of the action or story line. The beginning stage presents a situation with elements of conflict or instability, assumptions from which the story is developed. The middle state is the adjusting and working out of the beginning situation, moving toward a moment or event when the tension developed must turn. The end state is the solving of the problem, the settling of the particular action, or the turning back to a basic quality in the story; the reader is left with an attitude to take toward experience in general.[3]

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[1] The Scope of Fiction, p. xii.

[2] Ibid., p. 51.

[3] Ibid., pp. 52-56.

2. The second requirement of good fiction is characterization convincing to the reader. This answers the question of whose story it is. Though wide variation may exist in presentation of characters, they must be credible, recognizably human. The completely flat and usual character becomes an abstraction and there is no story; but the extremely eccentric character, who ceases to be humanly credible, becomes part of a psychiatrist's casebook.[1] Successful characters live in our imagination.

Secondly, the character who is central to the action should be clear. "So important is character to fiction that . . . it is usually of first importance to see whose fortunes are at stake--whose situation is settled by the events that are described."[2] Thirdly, what a man is determines what he says, what he does, and how he thinks. A character must speak "in character." Brooks and Warren say:

> An obvious test of fiction then is that the motives and actions of its characters are rendered coherent. It is the glory of fiction that the great artists have been able to render coherent so many strange and out-of-the-way, often apparently self-contradictory, examples of human nature.[3]

3. The third requirement is a story of some significance. This ultimate significance of a story is usually called theme. The

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[1] The Scope of Fiction, pp. 148-150.

[2] Ibid., p. 151.

[3] Ibid., p. 153.

theme necessarily develops from the experiences told in the story.[1]

Brooks and Warren define theme:

> Theme is what a piece of fiction stacks up to. It is the idea, the significance, the interpretation of persons and events, the pervasive and unifying view of life which is embodied in the total narrative. . . . And what we make of such human experience always involves, directly or indirectly, some comment on values in human nature and human conduct, on good and bad, on the true and the false, some conception of what the human place is in the world.[2]

4. Finally, the fourth requirement of good fiction is that it should have unity of the whole. The reader should be left with a definite idea, a unified experience of life. There is a dynamic unity of the plot, character, and theme. If the story seems too sentimental or unconvincing, it lacks this organic unity; the meaning the story claims to have does not actually reveal itself in the experience of the story, or the story fails in its logic of motivation or in character presentation. It is possible, of course, the reader may not agree with the idea or it may offend him because it denies his own values, his own basis for life. But, the story does hang together; it does say something; it is a unity.[3]

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[1] The Scope of Fiction, p. 234.

[2] Ibid., p. 229.

[3] Ibid., pp. 232-233.

CHAPTER II

MARI SANDOZ AS A NOVELIST

For all the adventure and melodrama with which Mari Sandoz fills her novels, perhaps none of her stories exceed the interest of her own life. It is one of hardships and determined conquest of obstacles. As one critic wrote:

> The story of Mari Sandoz' life has all the copy-books, success stories and inspirational lectures beat a mile for lessons in grim determination and courage. From the age of three months, when her father beat her senseless for crying in the night until she had to prove her identity to Boston's publishers by a sightless eye, it typifies the struggle of the poor and uneducated to escape from the land.[1]

Mari Sandoz was born in 1901 in Sheridan County, upper Niobrara country in western Nebraska, to Swiss-German immigrants, Jules Ami Sandoz and his fourth wife Mary Fehr. Mari was the oldest of six children--three boys and three girls. There was little time for playing and Mari Sandoz was close enough to the frontier to experience its hardships. Miss Sandoz says of her childhood:

> Our mother did most of the field and garden work, and so the care of the house and the children usually fell to me. When a baby was two weeks old it was put into my bed and was then my responsibility. I also learned to run father's trapline when necessary and to skin anything from a weasel to a cow. By the time I was ten I could bake up a 49-pound sack of flour a week, but I would let the bread sour and the baby cry if there was anything to read.[2]

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[1]Virginia Irwin, "Mari Sandoz: 1935," Prairie Schooner XLI (Summer, 1967), p. 172.

[2]Hostiles and Friendlies, p. xv.

She lost the sight of one eye from snowblindness received when she and her brother spent a day hunting and digging out cattle after a blizzard.

Age nine was a turning point in her life. She began school, and it wasn't until she started to school that she learned English and could read. Swiss-German was her mother tongue. She also began writing stories when she started to school. Her father disliked writers. When she was ten she wrote a story for the junior page of the Omaha Daily News and sent it. The story didn't win anything, but her father heard about it and punished her. After that she used a pen name, and some of her early stories were published under the name Marie Macumber.[1] After finishing the eighth grade, at age sixteen, she took the rural teacher's examination; she passed and taught school five years in western Nebraska.

As soon as she was old enough, at age twenty-one, she went to Lincoln, Nebraska, where for twelve years she worked here and there, attending the University as she could. During this time she worked in a drug laboratory and as an English assistant at the University to help pay her way. She was also proofreader and researcher on the Sioux Indian for the Nebraska State Historical Society (1927-1929). Because she had had no high school and had followed an irregular course schedule, she was not given a degree from the University of Nebraska. In 1950, the University of Nebraska

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[1]Hostiles and Friendlies, p. xvii.

awarded her an honorary Doctorate of Literature degree. She was working for the Nebraska State Historical Society when she received word that Old Jules had won the Atlantic non-fiction prize. After her university days she taught at writer's conferences at the Universities of Colorado and Indiana; from 1947 to 1956 she conducted novel writing courses at the summer Writer's Institute at the University of Wisconsin. She continued writing, dividing her time between New York and Nebraska.

Mari Sandoz described herself: "I grew up on the architectural scheme of the cowboy. Height five feet and a half-inch weight 105 pounds. Also weatherbeaten."[1] One critic said of her "she is a rugged individualist--at once hostile and friendly--a loner."[2] Another critic commented on ". . . the shyness and timidity that underlie this dynamism of the slender, courageous woman with the dark red curly hair and the snapping dark eyes."[3] Miss Sandoz had this to say about her literary preferences:

> Perhaps my earliest literary influences were Joseph Conrad, whose sea seemed to me so like the sandhills about me, and Hardy, whose recognition of chance and circumstance in the shaping of human destiny seemed very true to the fairly violent life about me. Later I discovered the work of Shakespeare, of the Russians, and finally the Greeks. Aristophanes and portions of the Old Testament are my favorite material for re-reading.[4]

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[1]Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1229.

[2]Nicoll, op. cit., p. 32.

[3]Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1229.

[4]Ibid.

During an interview after the success of Old Jules, she said that she had read everything Dreiser had written and she admired Sherwood Anderson.[1]

Mari Sandoz died March 10, 1966, in New York. She was buried on the family ranch between Ellsworth and Gordon, Nebraska. Since Mari Sandoz was born in and has been buried in the Nebraska she knew so well, it is not surprising that all of her novels deal, sooner or later, with some aspect of Nebraska history or life. This is apparent in the following brief synopses of the novels with the accompanying early criticism.

Synopses of Novels with Early Criticism

Slogum House, 1937, is the first "fiction novel" of Mari Sandoz. In reference to her first work, she said in an interview for the Saturday Evening Post, "But in less than a month I was building myself a shack of privacy in which to write a novel that I had been thinking about doing for nine or ten years."[2] A critic might wonder whether the book was worth nine years of thought. The story is primarily Gulla Slogum's effort to get even or to get revenge for her sisters-in-law Slogum's refusal to recognize her as one of the family. The language is often crude and vulgar; the incidents of the story frequently are cruel and offensive to human sensitivity.

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[1]Donald MacCampbell, "Mari Sandoz Discusses Writing," The Writer, November 1935, p. 405.

[2]Nebraskan," autobiographical sketch, Saturday Evening Post, March 4, 1939, p. 88.

The book was received with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Slogum House was banned from the Nebraska state libraries.[1] In the best fiction of the year poll conducted by Saturday Review, Slogum House received one vote as best fiction of 1937 from Sterling North, Chicago Daily News.[2] Margaret Wallace, reviewing the novel in the New York Times November 28, 1937, said Slogum House was neither sordid nor obscene.[3] This writer would not nominate Slogum House for a best fiction award, nor would the book be banned from libraries today.

Gulla Haber, of Ohio river trash status, traps Reudy Slogum, of wealthy, educated status, into a necessary marriage. Cast out by the Slogums, Gulla and Reudy live with the Habers as the Habers live. After seven children are born to them, Gulla announces they are going west where there is opportunity to become wealthy. The story opens when the Slogums have lived in Nebraska for several years with a Haber kind of reputation established.

Driven by her obsession to have a finer house than the Slogum sisters, Gulla has her sons murder and steal and her daughters prostitute themselves to further her cause. The cattlemen-homesteader fights are involved. Gulla grows wealthy. She forecloses mortgages and buys at sheriff sales. Gulla's brother Butch, a wanted man and a thoroughly despicable person, hides out at Gulla's and creates

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[1]Obituary, Publishers Weekly, March 21, 1966, p. 53.

[2]Saturday Review, April 2, 1938, p. 9.

[3]Book Review Digest, 1937, p. 865.

some problems which begin the deterioration of Gulla's control. In spite of her hopes, Gulla is never accepted by the Slogum sisters, and her own family have as little to do with her as possible even though they are under her power. Haunted by the knowledge that one of the family probably shot Butch and by the fear that Butch will return, Gulla loses her mind as she grows older and her health becomes poor. She imagines Butch is after her.

Although there are suggestions of secondary plots none is really developed. Reudy has the initiative to move out and live in his own small house on the family place, but he never really defies Gulla and frees the family. He does shoot Butch, but that he keeps secret for a long while.

The reviews of Slogum House are varied. One critic writes "Slogum House--a powerful novel with the same pioneer background which is part and parcel of all she is and knows."[1] Another claiming that " . . . it makes an incredible monster credible and unforgettable. It is a piece of fine reporting."[2] The Time reviewer disliked the violence: "Overburdened with violence to a point that occasionally touches burlesque, Slogum House is nevertheless written with power, gives a clearer picture of the wild environment than of the people who fought to make it better or the ones who tried to make it worse."[3] William Fox of the Boston Transcript wrote, "The story has

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[1]Biographical sketch, Wilson Bulletin for Libraries XII (February 1938), p. 364.

[2]Ernest E. Leisy, op. cit., p. 201.

[3]Book Review Digest, 1937, p. 865.

not intricate, artificial complications of plot, it is just burning, searing narrative, told with dazzling vividness . . . . Unpleasing as many of the themes are, they have an unmistakable ring of truth, and the rare flashes of poetic expression make one wish the proportion might have been reversed."[1] The most critical of the reviews was that of Howard Jones in the Saturday Review. Miss Sandoz excellently portrays "the incarnation of determined evil . . .the selfish cunning of insatiable desire has seldom been more sweepingly given in fiction since Balzac."[2] He says the book is too long; the immorality and energy become tiring. Because the good characters are ineffectual, there is no real conflict between good and bad.[3]

Mari Sandoz' second novel, Capital City, was published two years after Slogum House, in 1939. Miss Sandoz said Capital City was a "microcosmic study of the civilized world selling itself into fascism."[4]

The story centers around the observer, Hamm Rufe, grandson of a founding father of Franklin, capital of the state of Kanewa (presumably Lincoln, Nebraska). He has returned to Franklin during the depression years after more than twenty year's absence. He has apparently been on the East coast as a free lance writer and reports

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[1]Book Review Digest, 1937, p. 865.

[2]Howard Mumford Jones, review of Slogum House in Saturday Review, November 27, 1939, p. 6.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Hostiles and Friendlies, p. 116.

for various journals on the conditions and economic affairs of the common working man in this area. His identity is not known; he bears a large scar on his face, the result of a police-striker incident in Boston. He lives in a shack in the slum area, near the city dump.

Hamm Rufe is against the city fathers, including his own family. Murders, mistresses, suicides, killings, bribes, and graft are involved in the political and social life of the state. The farmer is being dispossessed; the relief lines grow. Strong anti-Jew and anti-government feelings create violence. The co-op is regarded communistic as is the WPA according to the super nationalists.

The reader sees Franklin over a ten-week period prior to election day. There is the university homecoming, the Labor Day parade, the fair, and the hunting season. The story is peppered with scandal. The novel ends with the results of the gubernatorial election. The voters, afraid of the party candidates, elect the Independent, Stetbetter, the America for Americans man; they have put a fascist in power and a police state takes over. Hamm Rufe is killed when he protects his mother (one of the town's controlling powers) as she protests the gold shirts attacking the truck strikers.

The reviewers were generally very critical of this novel. Rose Feld of Book wrote that although there was no vital central character, Miss Sandoz " . . . succeeds marvelously well in introducing and developing a score of minor characters and plots. As

a portrait of any American City, true in detail if not in total, Capital City is a challenging document."[1] The New Republic reviewer, B. E. Bettinger stated, "The display is so cluttered that the eye and mind become weary . . . the purity of her blacks and whites gives outline to the author's subject, but no flesh or color to the actors."[2] Clifton Fadiman said, "The author has plenty of hardbitten talent as Old Jules and Sloqum House, her previous books testify, but I think Capital City makes very little use of them."[3] George Grimes of Saturday Review felt " . . . the book would have been a better piece of art had it been relieved by some concession to innate goodness in Capital City inhabitants. Miss Sandoz makes no compromises with her general theme of the city's overmastering greed."[4] George Grimes' major criticisms were that many of the rumors and the backdoor gossip of Lincoln did appear in the novel, and that over emphasis was a weakness--even idiot newspapers wouldn't report news as suggested in the novel. However, Mr. Grimes did say Capital City "strikes out fearlessly against the most malignant scores in civic life. It does plead eloquently for decency in human relationships, and for honesty in high places. . . . It does report the Agrarian revolt, the cooperative movements, the battles of organized labor."[5]

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[1]Book Digest, 1939, p. 852.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]George Grimes, review of Capital City in Saturday Review, December 2, 1939, pp. 13-14.

[5]Ibid.

The third novel, The Tom-Walker published in 1947, is a novel in three parts. Each part represents a generation of the Stone family. In part one Milton Stone returns from the Civil War minus a leg and bitter over the war. His family goes ahead with his wedding as planned for the day he returns. Milton's problems are finding a place in society as a cripple, finding a job, and making a bad marriage work. He drifts along, finally moving to the Omaha, Nebraska, area where he works a medicine wagon circuit. He lives in poverty. He becomes a legendary figure, Iron leg, who can do Herculean things with his iron leg. A son, Martin, is born to Milton and his wife in later years.

Part two is the story of Martin Stone returning from the first world war. He has been gassed in France and spent much time in the hospital as his father before him had. Martin settles in Wyoming after he finds the girl he thought was waiting for him has married and become a mother. Martin marries an almost total stranger, much as one would go into a business. He too has to make a marriage work, find his place in society as an ex-soldier with a physical handicap. Martin also drifts along, his wife keeping the farm going and the family together. He works with bootleggers for a short time and has an affair with his ex-girl friend. Eventually Martin spends time in the veterans' hospital where treatments restore stability to his personality.

Part three is the story of Martin's son Milton who returns from World War II with a bullet lodged in his heart. He returns to

a wife and a four-year old daughter whom he has never seen. He, too, has a marriage to build, a job to find, and a place to make in society with his physical handicap. His wife keeps her job and they never really live together as man and wife. In spite of his college degree, he is unable to find a decent job. He moves from one job to another, continually involved in brawls related to the jobless, hungry people, and continually embarrassing his wife with the publicity.

The novel ends on a wild note. Milton has gone to Washington, D.C., to tell his wife they are going to live together after three years of separation. At a special session of the Senate, his wife's boss, a senator, takes over the country as a dictator, the controller of atomic power.

The reviews of The Tom-Walker vary. The Time reviewer called it "small shakes as a novel, it is long on period history, melodrama, local color and wondrously rowdy soldier, sod-hut and ranch-house talk."[1] H. G. Merriam in the New York Times called it "a vigorous and thoughtful novel."[2] J. H. Jackson of the New York Herald Tribune review wrote:

> What Miss Sandoz has written is a robust, vigorous folk-American fictional protest against the irresponsibility, the inability to learn, the giganticism, the refusal to face up to a situation which have brought America, she believes, to

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[1]Book Review Digest, 1947, p. 786.

[2]Ibid.

> the point where, like the circus man on stilts, (or like Facism, if you wish) the dynamics compel her to go on in ever greater strides.[1]

The New Yorker reviewer said "for all the author's undoubted talent, she never quite makes you believe in the tom-walker as the whooping, riotous gaudy old reprobate she tries so hard to create. It's all very well to be told that the one legged hero is colossal, but he remains just a greatly enlarged snapshot of a mean old man."[2] Nathan Rothman in the Saturday Review calls the novel an unrelieved statement of pessimism. He says some of her first class literary talents are a penetrating realism, swift and easy characterization, and sincerity. His main objection is " . . . a mismating of antagonists. The man of democracy is remodeled always upon the prototype Miss Sandoz knows and loves best, the Western frontiersman, the lonely plainbreaker, fiercely individual, untrammeled, unorganized."[3]

Miss Morissa, Doctor of the Gold Trail published in 1955 was the fourth novel. Like the earlier novels, it is laid in western Nebraska, this time at the bridge across the Platte on the gold trail to the Black Hills from Sidney in the 1870's. Morissa Thomas is a young woman doctor. She has been jilted, almost at the altar, because her illegitimate birth became known to her intended husband and her prospective in-laws refused to accept her. She leaves Omaha and

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[1]Book Review Digest, 1947, p. 786.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Nathan L. Rothman, review of The Tom-Walker in Saturday Review, August 30, 1947, p. 18.

goes to her stepfather, Robin Thomas, working in the North Platte River area where the novel opens. Here she stays to start a practice which grows in spite of the prejudice against a woman doctor that confronts her often.

Handsome bachelor Tris Polk, cattleman, falls in love with Morissa. He proposes twice but Morissa doesn't want to give up her practice. The homesteader-cattlemen issue develops with the romance: Morissa homesteads and Tris is a rancher. They finally have a public argument about the practices of Tris's ranch, after Morissa has set a wedding date. Within an hour after the romantic rupture, Morissa marries a young neurotic boy, Eddie, who has been a patient in her clinic for some time. The settlers don't care for Eddie and Miss Morissa's practice suffers. Eddie has the reputation of an outlaw. He becomes over-bearing and finally burns down her hospital which she has worked so hard to build. Eddie is discovered, shot, and killed while running away. Miss Morissa is asked to speak at the medical meeting in Omaha, and Tris Polk is still waiting to be her husband, while the settlers petition her to stay and re-build her hospital.

The early critics again appreciated Miss Sandoz' facility for creating a vivid setting. Oliver La Farge of Saturday Review said "Setting aside the fiction element, the book is a remarkably rich fabric of the mores and events of a fabulous period. . . . I know of no other popular work that so well covers the variety of

the frontier that vanished so fast."[1] Other reviewers agree with him. Charlotte Jackson of the New York Herald Tribune said " . . . the story is a highly colorful one in the old-fashioned manner with the fine historical background Miss Sandoz knows so well."[2] W. R. Bennett of the New York Times wrote " . . . this book is a mine of information regarding the Eighteen Seventies in the North Platte River country and a fine picture of a period of revolutionary change. . . . as a novel it doesn't succeed."[3] V. P. Hass of the Chicago Sunday Tribune commented "Miss Morissa is, to my mind, the finest achievement in the genre that we have ever had."[4]

The last novel Son of the Gamblin' Man, published in 1960, is not necessarily better because it is last. This is the story of the gambler John Cozad's building of the community of Cozad, Nebraska, at the 100th meridian. It is also the story of the artist Robert Henri's childhood as John Cozad's son. The community lasts through blizzard, drouth, and grasshoppers, but John J. doesn't last in the community. It is he that holds the community together through disaster and hard times, but he is resented. An arrogant man, John Cozad antagonizes the people. When he is forced to shoot a man in

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[1]Oliver La Farge, review of Miss Morissa in Saturday Review, December 17, 1955, p. 14.

[2]Book Review Digest, 1955, p. 796.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

self-defense, he sneaks out of Cozad and is soon followed by his family. The family live under fictitious names from then on. Robert Cozad becomes a widely recognized painter, Robert Henri.

The reviewers were again very critical and disagreed over the subject of the novel. The Saturday Review writer said:

> The story tells of the gambler and townsite promoter who founded Cozad, Nebraska and of his family, particularly his younger son . . . this tale is essentially Robert's story, the story of a sensitive, talented boy growing up . . . But it is also the story of the ambitious promoter . . . the story of frontier people fighting hunger, cold, blizzards, drouth, grasshoppers, prairie fires, and ruthless cattlemen.[1]

The Booklist comment said "the younger Cozad son, who becomes a famous artist, is a key figure, but it is not so much a people as a catalogue of events . . . chiefly of interest to readers of Sandoz earlier books."[2] Robert Morris, Chicago Sunday Tribune criticized " . . . the story line is ragged and thin, loosely bound only by the doings of Cozad. It's hard to keep from putting the book down, and once it's down, it's hard to pick it up again."[3] The Library Journal review calls the book "an incredibly amateurish piece of writing . . . nothing turns out quite right. . . ."[4] V. P. Hass writing in the New York Times called it excellent historical fiction though not "vintage Sandoz."[5]

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[1] Book Review Digest, 1960, p. 175.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

CHAPTER III

PLOT, THE STRUCTURE OF ACTION

The first aspect of Mari Sandoz' novels to be examined in this thesis is plot. As noted in the introduction, plot is simply what happens in the story. The Merriam-Webster New Collegiate Dictionary, second edition, defines a novel as "a fictitious prose tale of considerable length, in which characters and actions professing to represent those of real life are portrayed in a plot." Without plot a novel is not a novel.

Plot is, to use the more formal usage of Brooks and Warren, " . . . the structure of the action as presented in a piece of fiction."[1] It is not, they say firmly, the action in the world but the action selected by the writer for the story and it rests on conflict, on some element of instability. It must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, or to use the more technical terms: exposition, complication, climax, and denouement.[2]

Four of the five Sandoz "fiction" novels have the beginning stage of a plot, a situation with elements of conflict. In Slogum House, Gulla Slogum is beginning to build a cattle empire to become wealthy so that she can buy a finer house than her sisters-in-law. The conflict arises from Gulla's method of building this desired

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[1]The Scope of Fiction, p. 51.

[2]Ibid., p. 55.

empire. Her method includes anything that will benefit her: theft, prostitution, murder. Conflict arises when her husband and some of the children oppose her methods and all her family dislike her. The Tom-Walker is divided into three books, each book beginning with the same situation. A soldier returns from a war with a physical handicap to overcome as he adjusts again to civilian life. The elements of conflict are hard times, a poor marriage, and a wide separation in political views between the soldier and his family and community. In Miss Morissa a young girl doctor is making a new start in her life. The discovery of her illegitimate birth has cancelled her wedding plans and she has left an established practice. She must establish her practice and make a new life for herself. The elements of conflict are a frontier environment unknown to her, the "no woman doctors me" attitude, and a deep anger toward her birth that demands an almost destructive need to punish herself for it. Son of the Gamblin' Man begins with a professional gambler planning to build a model community on the prairie. His model community includes a solid citizen reputation for himself and his family. The element of conflict is primarily within the man John Cozad himself. What he wants is basically contrary to what he is and what he has been. Again the frontier environment is part of the problem.

The one novel without a beginning stage is Capital City. There are many situations described, but not one is the obvious beginning of a series of actions. The reader is shown the fall

festival and fair of Franklin through the eyes of a Hamm Rufe. The community is divided between the haves and the have nots, but the haves control the city. There are many factions: the liberal university crowd, the W.C.T.U. and Woman's Club ladies, the Polish district, and the squatters. The truck drivers are on strike and the city is involved in labor disputes. There are active fascist elements. Capital City contains numerous incidents--parades, family histories, political campaigning. All have Hamm Rufe as an observer. The reader still does not know whether this is Hamm Rufe's story, a labor strike story, or a story of political graft and corruptness in the community. Capital City fails almost before it begins to reveal a selected series of actions that form a structure. The incidents do not have the first requirement--logical relationship to one another. Miss Sandoz has failed to select her material.

Although Capital City fails in this requirement earlier, all of Miss Sandoz' novels begin to fall apart at the middle stage: the complication. The action of Slogum House proceeds from incident to incident as Gulla increases her wealth. The conflict with the good members of the family never develops. Gulla's family does nothing in real opposition; they just drift along with her. Son of the Gamblin' Man becomes a series of incidents too. A community is built but without any specific progression in development. The reader is not even sure this is John Cozad's story since he is the "gamblin' man." The incidents of prairie life shift emphasis from John Cozad to his son Robert and back again. There are horseback

rides, plum picking, organization of a Dramatic Club, saloon fights, and common settler talk, but they have no clear-cut relationship to one another. The three soldiers in The Tom-Walker seem to accept what happens as inevitable and unchangeable. They fight, drink, and talk army with other ex-soldiers. The men exist and the reader follows their dull, struggling routine. There is no active refusal to face their problems nor is there purposive action to meet their problems.

It is only in Miss Morissa that this middle stage of plot fares better. Morissa establishes her medical practice, meeting the challenges of attitudes and environment. She conquers her bitterness over her background sufficiently to develop a romance with Tris Polk, leading cattleman, and to set a wedding date.

According to Brooks and Warren, the complication moves to a moment of highest tension when something has to happen. This is the climax. This is "the moment when the story turns toward its solution."[1] Except for Miss Morissa, the novels have no climax, no point of highest tension. In Miss Morissa, this is the time when Tris and Morissa finally bring their conflicting homesteader-cattleman attitudes into the open--after the wedding plans are made.

Even though Miss Morissa has the climax situation, none of the novels, including Miss Morissa, has a successful conclusion. The end stage does not resolve the situation completely or even

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[1]The Scope of Fiction, p. 55.

restate it. Morissa succeeds in establishing a practice and in building a small clinic-hospital. Her own romantic situation is not so successfully concluded. In an unreal weak moment in the novel she marries a neurotic boy who is later killed when he flees after setting fire to the hospital. Morissa is left free for Tris Polk who is still waiting but the reader feels let down. To have wasted married life with the wrong man seems quite artificial and unconvincing in the story line.

There is no climactic situation in the other novels. In Son of the Gamblin' Man the model community is suddenly dropped after John Cozad shoots a man in self-defense and the family hurriedly and unobtrusively leaves town. The scene shifts suddenly to New York, years later. The reader is brought up to date on the doings of the Cozad family living under fictitious names as Robert Henri paints his father's portrait. The action of Slogum House just wears out. The sons die: Ward dies early of cancer, Cash is killed in an auto accident caused by drinking and speeding, and Hab is killed when his neckerchief catches in the gears of the windmill he is repairing. Daughter Libby lives with her father. Daughters Annette, Cellie, and Fanny live in town busying themselves with piano lessons and church work. Gulla, although wealthy, is not accepted by the Slogums and has made no specific move to see if she would be accepted. As her health fails she loses her mind, imagining Butch her brother is after her.

The Tom-Walker ends on a wild note as a dictator takes over the country. This is related to the last generation of Stones only because it is Milton's wife who is secretary to the man who takes over. She offers Milton a chance to shoot her boss, but Milton refuses or so the reader believes. The very last of the novel is terribly confused with either Milton's operation to remove the bullet in his heart a dream, or the senator's taking over the country a dream. The reader assumes that the heart operation is probably the dream. Each generation of Stones finds the same kind of conditions, but each succeeding generation finds living harder. None of the three men successfully keeps a job; their marriages remain indifferent affairs. They constantly quarrel with family and friends.

Capital City ends with the state election which puts a fascist power in office. Hamm Rufe is killed, but in a rather purposeless accident. He remained an observer throughout the story. Capital City just ends with another incident described.

Since it is apparent that Miss Sandoz failed in the fundamental requirement of a story, it is interesting to note that she was fully aware of these requirements. Mari Sandoz made a statement relative to plot. Discussing short story writing in an article for The Writer, April 1944, Miss Sandoz wrote:

> Very well, think about a story idea until you can put the whole thing into a declarative sentence: the main character, his dominant trait or traits, the locale, the conflict, the crucial moment, and the outcome. Now you are ready to begin. Write the first draft even if it is only the barest string of narrative, as fast as you can, to get movement. Then

> begin the actual writing, solidifying the background and the characterization, sharpening the dialogue, and improving the description. . . .[1]

Yet the most obvious failure in the area of plot is clear-cut movement. In fact, Miss Sandoz' "barest string of narrative" becomes lost in the detail "solidifying" the background. This writer calls these details trivia because they seem to clutter up the narrative and obscure the story line. They can take several forms: conversations, repeated colloquialisms, and repeated commonplace, routine incidents of daily life. Such details are trivia because they are usually unessential to the story and the same ones appear in several of the novels, if not in all of them. There are basically two kinds of trivia: pioneer and political.

The pioneer trivia includes blizzards, prairie fires, Fourth of July picnics, drouth, grasshoppers, homesteader-cattlemen feelings, and other lesser things such as the Kinkaid Act and suicides caused by the hard, lonely frontier life. The most often mentioned, if not a part of the story, is the blizzard. Son of the Gamblin' Man has, as well as several short references, a lengthy passage concerning the blizzard and its effects.[2] Blizzards are referred to in The Tom-Walker[3] and in Slogum House.[4] Miss Morissa, in the novel by that

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[1]Hostiles and Friendlies, p. 117.

[2]Mari Sandoz, Son of the Gamblin' Man, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1960), pp. 264, 266, 213, 210, 186.

[3]Mari Sandoz, The Tom-Walker, (New York: The Dial Press, 1947), pp. 117, 189.

[4]Mari Sandoz, Slogum House, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), p. 204.

name, is caught out in a blizzard lasting several days.[1] A blizzard is always a cold, dangerous matter whether it has specific bearing upon the story or not.

A remark undoubtedly representative of local idiom known to Miss Sandoz was to speak of a "shelling out" in reference to a baby's birth. In Capital City, after a blizzard, a doctor tells a settler, "A snowstorm shells out kids like a hot day does your beans."[2] The same expression appears in Slogum House as a remark Gulla made to Reudy "Nothing like a cyclone or a blizzard to make 'em shell out."[3] Again, in The Tom-Walker, a doctor comments "Derringer's tony patients may shell out by the calendar . . . but for me, horse or human, they seem to pick times of extreme inclemency or downright catastrophe."[4] In each case, this detail represents a passing remark that adds nothing particular to the description of a blizzard.

Even more apparent in Miss Sandoz' novels is the political trivia related to the period but having no real relationship to the story. There are always marches of some kind to clutter up the story. The farmers march on the capitol to push for the moratorium

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[1]Mari Sandoz, Miss Morissa, Doctor of the Gold Trail, (New York: Hastings House, 1955), pp. 102-108.

[2]Mari Sandoz, Capital City, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 330.

[3]Slogum House, p. 140.

[4]The Tom-Walker, p. 61.

on mortgages.[1] The unemployed march on Washington led by a man named Coxey.[2] A very representative passage of the kind of political comment, which appears often, is the following passage from The Tom-Walker.

> By late February it was hell a-blazing and the river up all over the country, with inauguration day just ahead and the Grant crows and the old Radicals threatening a filibuster--leave the country without a President unless their carpetbag count was accepted and Hayes given the White House. Once more the rioting started, but Tilden begged his party to let it go; the nation must not be torn by another civil war. So when the Republicans finally offered to withdraw the troops from the South if Hayes was given the election, the Tilden men agreed.
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> "Godamighty, it's an outright steal of the presidency!" Milton roared when he heard the news at Brulley's. . . . "No wonder those crooks in Washington worked so hard against Tilden. . . . After the way he's been exposing the graft of the Tweed ring in New York City, there's no telling what stink his manure fork might dig up at the capital."[3]

The names and incidents vary according to the period of time being written about. In Miss Morissa, it is the Indian Agencies and army troops, the British and Eastern money in ranches that provides the political trivia. In Son of the Gamblin' Man, it is the railroad industry's expansion, hard times, wage cuts and lay offs. Liberals, Radicals, co-operative movements, WPA., conservation corps, super-Americanism, Gold Shirters, and strikers make up the political trivia of Capital City.

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[1] Slogum House, p. 389.

[2] This is found in both Slogum House, pp. 68, 69 and The Tom-Walker, p. 128.

[3] The Tom-Walker, p. 97.

Some detail is necessary to a story; detail gives realism, local color. But local color does not in itself make a plot. In Miss Sandoz' novels the talk over the glass of beer, a cup of coffee, and at the get-togethers becomes wearying and interferes with the plot. Miss Sandoz is not selective with detail. The reader tends to forget what has just happened to whom; the action line gets lost and the plot flounders.

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER, DEVELOPMENT AND USE

The second requirement of good fiction is the development of characters that the reader believes in and cares about. This chapter is devoted to an analysis of Mari Sandoz' use of character.

The first requirement of character is that it should be clear to the reader. Brooks and Warren say a first question to be asked is whose story is being told. "So important is character to fiction that . . . it is of first importance to see whose fortunes are at stake--whose situation is settled by the events that are described."[1] There should be a clear, central character to the action of the story. The only one of the novels that does have a clear, central character is Miss Morissa.

As Mari Sandoz had difficulty with a clear story line, so did she have difficulty in focusing on a central character. The primary reason for this is point of view. Brooks and Warren say point of view is the "mind through which the material of the story is presented."[2] An inconsistent point of view accounts for no clear central character in the four novels. In Slogum House some incidents are seen from Libby's consciousness, some from Gulla's, some from Reudy's, and some from Ward's. Occasionally the reader "sees" through

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[1]The Scope of Fiction, p. 151.

[2]Ibid., p. 334.

the locator, Leo Platt. The reader's interest centers on Libby, one of the daughters, although Gulla is considered the central character probably because the evil she represents is so dominating and because she controls the family.

In Son of the Gamblin' Man, the point of view shifts completely from John Cozad to his son Robert and back again. There is no way of knowing which is to be central to the action or from whose point of view the action is seen. Supposedly the central character is each bock of The Tom-Walker is one of the Stone men. However, in the first two books, the wives, Lucinda and Penny, are just as central to the action as their husbands. The point of view shifts from husband to wife and back again. Capital City has numerous people but none are central characters. Capital City isn't anybody's story. Hamm Rufe is always around to observe, but he is not an active part of the story and focus. Miss Sandoz lacked the technical adeptness to solve the problem of point of view that would clarify her central characters.

A second requirement of characterization is that characters be credible. Brooks and Warren point out that "The domain of fiction is, then, the world of credible human beings."[1] They say the author may present his character directly, summarizing his traits and characteristics, or dramatically with dialogue and action.[2] In this

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[1]The Scope of Fiction, p. 150.

[2]Ibid., p. 149.

respect, the characters of all of Miss Sandoz' novels are weak. There is no depth of characterization. The reader doesn't see into a character; all is external. The reader is told a particular relationship exists, but he doesn't see that it does from the character's action.

An incident from Son of the Gamblin' Man will illustrate this weakness of Mari Sandoz' failure to dramatize her characters. Robert saves a picture of the two settlers burned by Print Olive to show to his father.[1] The picture produces a towering rage in John Cozad and with his cane he begins to beat his son. Robert runs off to the shack where bridge supplies are kept. Late in the evening John Cozad finds him and demands to be let in. Robert obeys. The outcome of this is a closeness seldom experienced between father and son. Yet all the two have done is to sit there in front of the fire for several hours. The only words spoken are by John Cozad. "'Oh, Robert, my son, . . . don't you see you almost drove me to doing you real harm? Don't you understand that I'm bedeviled from every side?'"[2]

It is difficult to imagine that a close bond of feeling and understanding result from this sitting together a few hours without any conversation. The relationship of the boy to his father previously had been a mixture of fear and admiration. The father entered the shack still in an angry mood, and the boy was still

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[1]That Print Olive, rancher, caught and set fire to two settlers to scare the settlers out is probably historically true.

[2]Son of the Gamblin' Man, p. 181.

afraid of his father. The brief dialogue is inadequate to set feelings right between the two. Miss Sandoz does not show why the picture has such importance for John Cozad. So they just sat and had a marvelous feeling of closeness.

When Morissa suddenly marries Eddie, in Miss Morissa, the reader never knows why. It is suggested later Morissa doesn't know why or that it seems impossible to her that she married Eddie. But there is no exposition or dialogue to show Morissa's thinking or reasoning at the time she married Eddie.

Miss Sandoz, not infrequently, introduces a character which the reader feels is important but she does not develop the character. In Son of the Gamblin' Man, Teresa Cozad and her parents are part of the story. Occasionally it is Teresa's consciousness telling the story; yet, Teresa's personality and character, her attitude toward her husband and his dreams remains vague. Tris Polk in Miss Morissa remains an ideal, romantic, figure. He is handsome, kind, gentle, intelligent--all that could be desired. But the reader doesn't really see Tris Polk in action to bear out the constant description of him. Lack of character development accounts for no central character in Capital City. Several people seem to be important at times, but they appear briefly in one incident to be forgotten till another incident a chapter or two later.

Because there isn't depth to most of Miss Sandoz' characters, they are neither convincing nor credible. The reader finds himself saying it's possible there are people like this, there probably are

people like these people, but I don't know anyone quite like them. The Slogum family is a good example. Gulla is so thoroughly evil, she seems almost too evil to be true. That grown men who are not afraid to kill, are not afraid of other men's guns, are so afraid to disagree or to go against their mother whom they apparently dislike is hard to believe. What there is in a man who is so good and kind, but who watches and permits his wife to make prostitutes, even if high class ones, of his own daughters is never shown. He is hard to believe true. Miss Sandoz tells of these qualities of her characters, but she does not show it in words or action.

To be credible the actions of a character must be coherent. They should be consistent with what he is. Brooks and Warren believe that even the eccentric character must command the reader's belief. "His thoughts and actions must ultimately be coherent,"[1] Miss Sandoz' characters are not always consistent in their actions. The following passage shows Gulla completely out of character. Hab had turpentined Ward's dog and Ward shot the dog to put him out of misery. Gulla was not sentimental and did not show kindly, motherly love to her children. She, herself, had thrown boiling water on the dog to keep him away from the house. Yet this follows: "And when the boy was in his bed at last Gulla came to him with the lamp held high over her. She touched her heavy palm to his forehead as though to comfort this youngest son. But Ward didn't know what she meant and turned his

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[1] The Scope of Fiction, p. 153.

face from her."[1] John Cozad won't have gambling in his town, his model community. He is outraged if anyone in the community gambles. But whenever John is short of cash he makes a trip away to the gambling houses to replenish his cash. He does the opposite of what he expects others to do and then wonders why he is resented, but his attitude toward gambling hardly seems consistent with his behavior otherwise.

The most flagrant inconsistency in character occurs in Miss Morissa. Morissa's marriage to Eddie is so completely out of character that it comes as a complete shock to the reader. Morissa's decision to homestead was not a spur of the moment decision; she thought ahead. Neither did she run off with Tris and marry him the first time he proposed. She didn't feel ready for marriage even though she was aware of her attraction to him. Eddie was much younger than Morissa; he had seemed more of a son. She was fully aware of his sick dependency on her. Yet she married Eddie and promptly regretted it. She told her father, "As soon as it was done I realized how shameful."[2] If Morissa were an ignorant type of person this action might have been more believeable. But Morissa was educated; she knew people and natures; she was quite careful about deciding important things. That Morissa would marry on the spur of the moment, even in the heat of anger, to a neurotic boy is illogical.

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[1]Slogum House, p. 96.

[2]Miss Morissa, p. 177.

It can well be concluded that Miss Sandoz' characters are weak. Her characters do not live in one's imagination. If one can find the central character, he is flat and vague, inconsistent and ill-developed.

CHAPTER V

FAILURE IN UNITY

The final chapter of this thesis analyzes the novels of Mari Sandoz for what Brooks and Warren feel is essential, the novel as an organic and artistic whole--the unity that a work of art must have. Fundamental to that, of course, is theme.

According to Brooks and Warren, the ultimate significance of a novel is the theme. Theme is what the book says about life and it involves comment on values, human nature, the good and the bad. Theme is a structural necessity. Brooks and Warren say, "If there is no satisfactorily developed theme, all our other interests, no matter how intense they may be tend to evaporate. If we want a story, we are forced by our very psychological make-up to demand a theme. No theme, no story."[1]

Miss Sandoz' novels, with one possible exception, seem to fail to supply a clear-cut significance or meaning. In this they fail again to meet the requirement of good fiction. Miss Sandoz herself was aware of this necessity of theme. She intended a theme because for Twentieth Century Authors she wrote that she never began "to write even a two-page article--let alone a story or a book--without making first a simple, declarative statement of the theme,

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[1] The Scope of Fiction, p. 230.

to be tacked up before my eyes for the duration of the work."[1] For all her good intentions, she just doesn't develop a theme from the story as she should.

The novel which comes closest to achieving a coherent theme is Miss Morissa. Prefacing the novel is this verse taken from a Hymn in a Homesteader's Notebook:

> Desperate Pilgrim, Ever, ever crossing
> O'er the flooding waters And the fiery sands.[2]

Interpreting this to refer to the person who is driven to new lands and new endeavor and overcomes obstacles through courage and determination, the theme for Miss Morissa is set. Morissa Kirk left an established medical practice because her personal life has reached the end of a blind alley. She starts over in a new and somewhat hostile environment; the story develops this experience. The comment on such experience in the novel is that hard work and determination do bring success. Morissa succeeds as a doctor in a pioneer environment and basically succeeds in working out her personal problems. She consistently shows determination and will and courage. This is not a very unusual or original theme, but it is nonetheless clear in its development.

The other novels do not develop themes. In a preface to Son of the Gamblin' Man, Miss Sandoz stated that John Cozad's trail was "too shadowed and confused for the complete clarification

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[1] Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1230.

[2] Miss Morissa, title page.

demanded by non-fiction. I have kept to the facts available and only filled in the few holes necessary to reconstruct something of the crucible in which the dross of the son's youth was burned away and the gold of it freed to find itself."[1] The story itself did not make clear the meaning of this statement. However, in Love Song to the Plains Miss Sandoz makes a comment which explains what Son of the Gamblin' Man was intended to show. At Cozad, Robert Henri learned the courage and the techniques required to fight the battles for his brother artists in New York many years later."[2] The theme should have revealed something about Robert's character development. The novel really makes no comment on character values or on anything else. The reader is not ever sure that it is Robert's story.

In relation to themes of her novels, Miss Sandoz makes an interesting statement. In a letter to the editor of the University of Nebraska Press, August 10, 1957, she said, "The whole allegorical aspect of my fiction . . . has been almost entirely neglected, partly because each book draws new reviewers. Many of my readers find in my first three novels the allegories I intended them to be."[3] These novels are Slogum House, Capital City, and The Tom-Walker.

Preceding Slogum House is the statement "The sky knows no hunger, and the earth heals her wounds, but the time of man is

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[1]Son of the Gamblin' Man, p. x.

[2]Mari Sandoz, Love Song to the Plains, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 227.

[3]Hostiles and Friendlies, p. 139.

short,"[1] from Milt Green, Chapter XV. This writer has been unable to identify Milt Green. This enigmatic statement is not clarified by reference Miss Sandoz made to Slogum House. In an article for The Writer, April 1944, she asked where but in a novel could she discuss "a will-to-power individual and her system for dominating her world as I did in Slogum House."[2] Gulla's evil system for dominating is developed in the novel. Evil reigns, but evil isn't a theme without some comment about it. There is no comment on evil. The good characters never really conflict with evil Gulla. The novel doesn't say evil or good wins out, nor does the novel really say life is short so one should live his best now. There is no ultimate significance to the story. The only possible allegory is that Gulla herself is evil reincarnated or evil in the flesh, but what this has to do with earth and sky (or nature) is very uncertain.

Capital City, the second novel, is preceded by a very brief statement and a short forward. Miss Sandoz clearly states that all the characters are fictitious and all scenes are imaginary. The foreward geographically places the state Kanewa in the Great Plains. Neither the foreward nor the statement set a theme for the novel and a theme does not develop. The collection of incidents and family histories has no direction; it says nothing about human experience. Miss Sandoz said later that Capital City is a "microcosmic study

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[1] Slogum House, un-numbered front page.

[2] Hostiles and Friendlies, p. 116.

of the civilized world selling itself into fascism. . . ."[1] However, this idea does not manifest itself. There should surely be stages in the process of selling out to fascism or there should be very definite ways pointed out, showing the creeping in of fascism. There are no parts of the process revealed. The allegory might be that Kanewa is the state of Nebraska which represents the civilized world. The state Capitol at Lincoln, Nebraska, has a high dome that stands out just like the imaginary capitol building of Kanewa at Franklin. At the end of the book fascism appears, but its appearance is unconvincing.

The statements that precede The Tom-Walker and each of the three books of the novel are interesting but not enlightening on the matter of theme. They are from The Knights by Aristophanes. The first quotation preceding all three books is: "'But none can escape the Paphlagonian, his eye is everywhere. And what a stride! He has one leg on Pylos and the other in the Assembly; his rump is exactly over the land of the Chanonians, his hands are with the Aetolians and his mind with the Clopidians.'"[2] Probably the Paphlagonian in the novel is government power seized by one man and The Tom-Walker then should say this is how a democracy breaks down. Each generation of the Stone family would probably represent a specific approach to government power (as suggested by the statements preceding each book) and a particular level of government power and

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[1]Hostiles and Friendlies, p. 116.

[2]The Tom-Walker, un-numbered front page.

control. Presuming these ideas, the end of the novel does not appear so wild. The novel ends when a senator takes over the country, even controlling atomic power. The experience of The Tom-Walker does not establish this intended theme.

One reason for failure to establish this theme is that the characters are of one type, of one economic level, and do not appear to be good judges of government. The three soldiers do not represent the average returning soldiers from any of the three wars, nor do they represent all economic and professional levels and groups. Another reason for failure is that each succeeding generation of Stones does no better or no worse in adjusting to life; therefore, they represent no new approach in relation to government control. So there is no ultimate significance, no comment on the human experience. The reader is never emotionally involved with anyone or any incident. No theme develops.

The final criteria for good fiction is the existence of a dynamic unity of plot, character, and theme. The fiction novels of Miss Sandoz lack this most basic requirement with one exception, again Miss Morissa. Although far from a great or perfect novel Miss Morissa most frequently meets the requirements of plot, character, and theme and establishes the essential artistic unity. One experiences something of the drama of frontier hardship for women in Miss Morissa.

There can of course be no unity of non-existent aspects, and the other novels lack plot, characterization, and theme. After

finishing the novel, the reader does not understand what the novel means. He is not certain whose story it is and what actually happens. There is no unified experience of life.

Perhaps the biggest weakness in Miss Sandoz' fiction work is her failure to be selective. In discussing plot, Brooks and Warren said plot "is not . . . the structure of an action as we happen to find it out in the world, but the structure within a story . . . what the teller of the story has done to the action in order to present it to us. . . ."[1] The author must be selective of his materials and this is what Miss Sandoz fails to be. She presents the world as it is or as it was, but she does not create a story, a character, a theme out of it. She uses "trivia," pioneer and political, which obliterates the story line; she fails to achieve a coherent point of view in characterization, and she fails to achieve her own stated purposes in theme. She is not selective of incidents. She tells all and everything; consequently, without selection, the plot is lost, and character and theme are not developed.

It is clear from the evaluation of Mari Sandoz' novels on Brooks and Warren criteria that Mari Sandoz is not a good novelist. With the exception of Miss Morissa, her novels fail to meet the requirements established for good fiction. This evaluation explains why all the fiction novels, excepting Miss Morissa, are out-of-print and will undoubtedly remain out-of-print. If a person wishes to

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[1] The Scope of Fiction, p. 51.

read Mari Sandoz, he will read the non-fiction and enjoy it. But he will not find Mari Sandoz' novels worth the effort.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

This thesis has evaluated the novels of Mari Sandoz, well-known Nebraska writer, by the criteria for good fiction established by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their textbook The Scope of Fiction. Chapter I introduces Mari Sandoz as a writer and gives the statement of purpose and the criteria to be used in evaluating her novels: plot, character, theme, and unity.

Chapter II gives a brief biographical sketch of Miss Sandoz. A synopsis of each novel and some of the early criticism of the novel are also included in the chapter.

Chapter III discusses plot, the structure of action. Because Miss Sandoz is not selective of detail, but obliterates the story line with pioneer and political trivia, she fails to develop plot or structured action. The one exception is Miss Morissa which does have a story line.

Chapter IV discusses Miss Sandoz' use and development of Characters. Excepting Miss Morissa, the novels lack a clear central character to the action. She fails to use a consistent point of view which results in both lack of depth in the characters and inconsistent action of the characters.

Chapter V explains Miss Sandoz' failure to achieve the artistic unity required of good fiction. Although she planned a theme for each novel, the intended theme, as well as plot and characterization, are not developed. There can be no unity with these weaknesses. Miss Sandoz fails to be selective with her material so that her novels cannot be regarded as unified wholes. The one novel excepted is Miss Morissa which basically meets the requirements and which is still in print. Mari Sandoz is not a successful fiction novelist.

APPENDIX

WORKS OF MARI SANDOZ

Biography:

Old Jules 1935

Crazy Horse 1942

Cheyenne Autumn 1953

Novels:

Slogum House 1937

Capital City 1939

The Tom-Walker 1947

Winter Thunder 1954 (novelette)

Miss Morissa 1955

The Horsecatcher 1957 (novelette)

Son of the Gamblin' Man 1960

The Story Catcher 1963 (novelette)

Non-fiction:

The Buffalo Hunters 1954

The Cattlemen 1958

Hostiles and Friendlies 1959

These Were the Sioux 1961

Love Song to the Plains 1961

The Beaver Men 1964

Old Jules Country 1965

The Battle of the Little Bighorn 1966

The Christmas of the Phonograph Records, A Collection 1966

Numerous short stories and articles

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